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## Well safety jobs, expertise on the rise with gas industry


By Elizabeth Skrapits (Staff Writer)  
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When a natural gas well blew out in Clearfield County on June 3, it spewed gas and chemical-laden wastewater for 16 hours until experts could be brought in from Texas to cap it.

In an attempt to prevent a repeat of that scenario as drilling in the Marcellus Shale expands, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection Secretary John Hanger said DEP has made arrangements with a Houston-based well control company that is opening an emergency response and natural gas support services facility in Bradford County.

"Hopefully that will help people be assured there is expertise and equipment here," Mr. Hanger said. "These are not local fire units. These are expert individuals with expert equipment, who are trained in the oil and gas business." Cudd Energy Services, the parent company of Cudd Well Control, is starting a branch in a 55,000-square-foot building at 2897 Route 414 in Canton. Mr. Hanger said 16 specially-trained well control responders will be employed there.

"There will always be one senior well control specialist in the state at any given time, and there will be a number of what we call first responders," said Troy White, director of business development for Cudd Well Control. "It's a very small fraternity of specialists, and that's why it's difficult to be everywhere."

Cudd will also be hiring local people. According to the (Towanda) Daily Review, a Times-Shamrock newspaper, the company is bringing about 100 jobs to the area, including safety personnel, mechanics, field engineers, lab technicians and warehouse and administrative employees.

Mr. Hanger said DEP's decision to make arrangements with Cudd was prompted by the incident in Clearfield County and a July 23 accident in Allegheny County, when a natural gas well exploded while undergoing maintenance, killing two workers.

Local fire response was excellent in both cases, but dealing with an out-of-control natural gas well requires specialized training, Mr. Hanger said. He said it is not reasonable to expect volunteer fire companies to have the experience or equipment to shut the wells down.

"The whole point is not to be relying on just calling Texas. We agree that can't continue," Mr. Hanger said. "The resources and expertise would supplement any local fire units."

Cudd, which has been around since 1978, specializes in well blowouts, firefighting and deep wells. The company fought oil well fires in Kuwait in 1991, Mr. White said. The firm plans to work with local emergency personnel, as well as the gas companies and their contractors.

"We would prefer, rather than having to respond to emergencies ... an equal and even more important part of our business is the prevention side," Mr. White said.

Cudd Energy Services can help natural gas drilling companies with preventing accidents, drilling inspections and blowout contingency planning, Mr. White said. Another service Cudd can provide is minimizing the chances of methane migration into drinking water supplies by helping gas companies get a good casing program and a drilling plan in place, Mr. White said.

Each natural gas driller contracts with well control companies to be called in case of an emergency. Encana Oil & Gas USA Inc., which is drilling Luzerne County's first exploratory wells in Fairmount and Lake townships, has Wild Well Control Inc. and Boots & Coots Well Control listed in their DEP-required emergency response plan, along with Cudd.


In fact, Encana has just moved Cudd to first responder, Mr. White said, noting, "We work for Encana all over." Generally speaking, the chances of something catastrophic happening are lower with shale than with porous rock like limestone or sandstone, Mr. White said.

When well problems do occur, he added, they are usually during the completion process, when the shale has been hydraulically fractured and its pores are opened and connected, leaving a clear path for the gas to come into the well bore.

"If something should come up, we'll be there ready to respond," Mr. White said.

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